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Perceptions of Finnish Upper Secondary School Students of the Assessment Practices of Their Teachers

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Abstract

This paper addresses Finnish students' perceptions of assessment practices in upper secondary schools. We study the students' experiences of assessment and how they assess their ability to use and understand feedback from teachers. The data were gathered on a web-based questionnaire administered to 918 students in four upper secondary schools. The questionnaire contained both closed-ended and open-ended questions. According to students' responses, most consider that they can use and understand their teachers' feedback, and that teachers usually apply traditional assessment methods. The results provide a pathway to enhanced versatility in assessment practices. We also consider the important role of assessment in teaching and how teachers' assessment literacy could be enhanced and made more visible. We also ponder whether we should also consider students' assessment literacy alongside that of teachers.

Introduction

In this study, we analyse what assessment practices are used in upper secondary schools and how the different roles and tasks of assessment are understood by upper secondary school students and their teachers. The assessment guidelines are given to the education providers and teachers in the Finnish National Core Curriculum for upper secondary education (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2015). In the National Core Curriculum, assessment and its roles during and at the end of the learning process are seen in both formative and summative ways. In Finnish upper secondary school, students must complete at least 75 courses in three years to participate in the matriculation examination, which is the only high-stakes exam in the Finnish general education system. The duration of each course is calculated to last 38 lesson hours. In upper secondary education, students build their own syllabi from compulsory and optional courses that are governed by the distribution

of lesson hours stated in the curriculum (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2015) with the compulsory syllabus comprising 18 subjects. Students must successfully complete 75 courses to graduate, of which 47–51 are mandatory, depending on students' choice of basic vs. advanced mathematics. The subject-specific tests of the matriculation examination are based on auxiliary specialization courses, the number of which also varies between subject. The examination comprises 39 separate tests in 25 subjects, out of which each student must complete at least four. Only the test in the student's mother tongue (i.e., Finnish or Swedish) is mandatory, while the student has to choose the other three mandatory tests from mathematics, foreign languages, the other national language, and one of the humanities or natural sciences.

Regardless of the school subjects, all the upper secondary education courses contain formative assessment and summative assessment, while the matriculation examination is based entirely on summative assessment. The current curriculum for upper secondary school emphasizes the use of versatile assessment methods in teaching; teachers should give feedback and guidance to students to enhance and deepen their skills in learning to learn, life-long learning, self-regulation, and self-assessment (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2015). These ambitious goals are also salient skills for the 21st century (Griffin, Care, & McGaw, 2012; Martin, 2018).

According to international research on educational assessment, almost one-third of teachers' professional time is associated with assessment (Stiggings, 2014). Assessment constitutes an integral part of teaching and learning (Race, Brown, & Smith, 2005; Taras, 2005; Wiliam, 2011); carefully executed, its aim is to direct students' learning towards the expected outcomes of teaching (Gronlund, 2003), to reveal what a student has learned (Wiliam, 2010, 2011), to motivate students (Kozma & Roth, 2012), to help in the planning of future teaching (Hogan, 2007), and to affect students' decisions after graduation (Race et al., 2005). In Finland, the curriculum for upper secondary education (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2015) underlines the importance of formative assessment; it enhances learning, seeks to guide and support the learning process, makes the learning objectives visible, and helps students understand their progress, with the skills of self-assessment (Black & William, 2012).

Teachers should be skilled in selecting appropriate assessment practices (American Federation of Teachers [AFT], National Council on Measurement in Education [NCME], & National Educational Association [NEA], 1990) because assessment plays an important role in teachers' work. Teachers' knowledge and understanding of formative assessment and its ability to support students' learning is crucial, especially for raising the quality of teaching and for improving students' ability to understand their own learning processes. Feedback is an integral part of formative assessment. In contrast, summative assessment describes the level of knowledge and skills the learners possess.

Assessment Literacy

To enhance these skills in school requires teachers to encompass knowledge of versatile, sound, and current assessment practices, and knowledge of their implementation in teaching; in other words, teachers need to be assessment literate (Fulcher, 2012). Assessment, at least from the

Finnish perspective, has been a quite neglected theme, even though teacher education has been research-based for a long time in Nordic countries. According to Atjonen (2017), there are major differences in Finnish pre-service teacher training programs as to the extent to which assessment literacy is taught at different universities. The differences in pre-service training are inevitably related to teachers' competence in assessment and its practices; although teachers are supposed to be assessment literate after their pre-service training, in practice even the concept of assessment literacy has been defined or understood quite differently (Hildén & Fröjdendahl, 2018).

The seminal guidelines provided by the AFT, NCME, and NEA (1990) state that teachers should be proficient in selecting and creating appropriate assessment methods, be able to administer, score, and interpret the results of these assessment methods, and use assessment results to plan teaching and develop curriculum. Moreover, teachers are expected to be adept at creating valid grading procedures, discussing assessment results with parents, and recognizing misconduct such as ethical dilemmas or inappropriate assessment methods. To assess students, these standards provide an explicit framework of the areas in which teachers ought to be skilled (Webb, 2002). These standards have greatly influenced teaching research in assessment. However, formative assessment has not been included in the standards (Brookhart, 2011).

The national curriculum (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2015) emphasizes the use of versatile assessment methods; this requires expertise in a range of assessment methods and implementing them in teaching. This refers to assessment literacy. Not surprisingly, there is a lack of consensus on the definition of this term. Inbar-Lourie (2008) highlighted the essence of the aspects of *why*, *what*, and *how* when defining assessment literacy skills, and Davies (2008) underlined the goals for assessment literacy comprising domains of skills, knowledge and principles. However, Taylor (2013) suggested a different set of profiles for stakeholder groups, because assessment literacy means different things for a teacher compared to a test designer. According to Popham (2009), assessment literacy can be conceptualized as “a teacher’s familiarity with those measurement basics related directly to what goes on in the classroom” (p. 4), whereas Webb (2002) states that assessment literacy refers “to the knowledge of means for assessing what students know and can do, how to interpret the results from these assessments, and how to apply these results to improve student learning and program effectiveness” (p. 1). However, Fulcher (2012) provides a rather detailed definition of the concept:

The knowledge, skills and abilities required to design, develop, maintain or evaluate, large-scale standardized and/or classroom based tests, familiarity with test processes, and awareness of principles and concepts that guide and underpin practice, including ethics and codes of practice. The ability to place knowledge, skills, processes, principles and concepts within wider historical, social, political and philosophical frameworks in order to understand why practices have arisen as they have, and to evaluate the role and impact of testing on society, institutions, and individuals. (p. 125)

In other words, teachers should include knowledge of creating and implementing sound assessment methods in teaching. Moreover, teachers ought to be aware of ethics and wider frameworks at

historical, social and political levels. As assessing students demands myriad decisions (Schafer, 1991), teachers should exhibit knowledge of all integral aspects of assessment (McMillan, 2000). Merely implementing summative assessment methods in school does not suffice (Green & Mantz, 2002).

Even though assessment plays a crucial role at school, it seems that teachers are inclined to apply somewhat traditional assessment practices. For instance, Arrafii and Sumarni (2017) studied English teachers' ($N = 243$) understanding of formative assessment. The results indicate that teachers' knowledge of formative assessment was deficient, and training in assessment had been inadequate. Moreover, Gottheiner and Siegel (2012) studied the assessment literacy of five experienced middle school teachers and found that their range of assessment practices was limited at times. Bennett (2011), in turn, is highly sceptical of the fact that average teachers can implement formative assessment methods in teaching and argues that time and support are needed for teachers' knowledge to be developed. Popham (2010) holds the view that "one of the most serious problems in today's education profession is that the level of educators' 'assessment literacy' is so abysmally low" (p. 175). In short, it seems that teachers' assessment practices are incongruent with the recommendations in literature.

The national curriculum for upper secondary education (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2015) emphasizes formative assessment and reflects the recent studies of it (see Huhta, 2010; Leontjev, 2016). Nevertheless, there still is a strong tendency to study the role of summative assessment in the Finnish upper secondary education system and matriculation examination and its impacts on students (see Hildén & Rautopuro, 2017; Kupiainen, Marjanen, & Hautamäki, 2016; Kupiainen, Marjanen, & Ouakrim-Soivio, 2018). However, for students to be able to guide and plan their own studies, they also must have the knowledge, skills, and understanding required for assessment. Put differently, students should also have the assessment literacy skills that they need to give and receive feedback. In the Finnish context, few studies exist concerning the ability of upper secondary school students to use the feedback that they have received as a part of formative or summative assessment. This is also the reason why we are interested in knowing what classroom practices are utilized by Finnish upper secondary school teachers, and how students are able to use the feedback they are giving and receiving.

The Power of Feedback

Assessment influences learning tremendously, which is called the backwash effect of assessment. This term is also referred to as washback (Bailey, 1999). Backwash can be defined as how a test influences teaching and learning (Hughes, 1991), and currently, it is generally perceived as being either harmful or beneficial. Washback can be conceptualized as harmful "when a test's content or format is based on a narrow definition of language ability" (Taylor, 2005, p. 154). By contrast, beneficial washback refers to a testing procedure encouraging fine teaching practice (Taylor, 2005). Some language testers consider washback to be one dimension of impact; others see washback and its impact as separate concepts relating respectively to micro and macro effects within society. Most testers locate washback and impact within the theoretical notion of

consequential validity in which according to Messick (1996), the social consequences of testing are part of a broader, unified concept of test validity.

It is instrumental for teachers to consider the different roles and tasks of assessment. Scriven (1967) created the concepts of formative assessment (assessment for learning) and summative assessment (assessment of learning) for curriculum evaluation, but Bloom, Hastings, and Madaus (1971) extended the concepts for assessment of individual students as well. Originally, the aim of this division was to accentuate the time of assessment in addition to the range of tasks of assessment. Formative assessment takes place as the learning process is happening, whereas summative assessment is used after a certain period, for instance at the end of a course or a term. Currently, assessment also includes guiding the learning process itself (Bloom et al., 1971; Huhta, 2010).

Despite the differences between formative and summative assessment, it seems that differentiating between them in practice is not simple. Taras (2005) points out the complexity of the tasks of assessment in her research; summative assessment can be executed in formative ways. For instance, teachers can give feedback to their students when giving them their exam results (Taras, 2005). Moreover, formative and summative assessment should not be mutually exclusive; instead, they should be complementary.

The aim of formative assessment is to guide students to understand their own learning and progress in it. Hattie and Timperley (2007) show that feedback is one of the more powerful influences on learning and achievement. However, the type of feedback and the way it is given can be differentially effective. Hattie and Timperley propose a model of feedback based on Hattie's (1999) synthesis of several meta-analyses. To be effective, feedback should answer three questions: "Where am I going? (What are the goals?) How am I going? (What progress is being made toward the goal?) Where to next? (What activities need to be undertaken to make better progress?)" (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 86). In their model, feedback operates at four levels: the *task level*, the *process level*, the *self-regulation level*, and the *self-level*. The effectiveness of the answers to these questions is contingent on the level at which feedback operates.

At the task level, feedback describes whether a student's response is correct or incorrect, whereas feedback at the process level seeks to describe the process underlying the task. The aim of feedback about self-regulation is to strengthen students' autonomy and reflection. Self-regulation in a learning context can be defined as the competence of learners to plan, execute and assess the learning processes, involving continuous decisions on cognitive, motivational, and behavioural aspects of the learning cycle process (Deci, Hodges, Pierson, & Tomassone, 1992). Students learn self-regulation through experience and self-reflection. According to Zimmerman and Kitsantas (1997), the distinction between the self-control and self-regulation phases of cognitive-motor skill development is the need for learners to focus initially on performance processes as students begin to practise on their own instead of outcome or product goals. Focusing on outcomes before fundamental process techniques is expected to impair learning because novice learners make detrimental process adjustments until they acquire self-evaluative expertise.

Self-assessment is a focal part of being self-regulated; effective students can assess their learning, which enhances their future studies. Feedback at the self-level refers to personal feedback

about the student. Feedback at the self-regulation level enhances learning most effectively, whereas feedback at the self-level rarely influences learning (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Similarly, other researchers have pointed out that unfocused praise is not regarded as an efficient way to give feedback (e.g. Crooks, 1988; Hattie, 2012; Kluger & DeNisi, 1998; Skipper & Douglas, 2012). Regarding the levels, however, there are also studies reporting the view that the process and the self-regulation levels are rather complex in this model and that process has been defined unusually. Alderson, Haapakangas, Huhta, Nieminen, and Ullakonoja (2015) propose that the two levels can be merged into one: the “strategy level” (p. 172).

Research Questions

In this paper, we answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What assessment practices do upper secondary teachers use?

RQ2: What assessment practices do students appreciate?

RQ3: What improvement do students propose to their teachers’ assessment practices?

RQ4: How do students perceive their own ability to understand and use teachers’ feedback?

Research questions 1 and 2 have been studied with the same open-ended questions regarding positive and negative experiences about the assessment practices and the versatile assessment practices teachers use and students appreciate.

Data and Methods

The data were collected in 2018 as a part of Finnish upper secondary school teachers’ in-service training and consist of responses from 918 students at four upper secondary schools in Finland. The questionnaire focused on students’ perceptions of assessment in upper secondary schools, but the questions were not subject-specific. All the respondents whose answers were used in this data gave their written permission to use the answers for research purposes. The schools participated in a development project called *Pulssi* (Pulse in English), through which the goal was to develop teachers’ assessment skills and practices. The questionnaire for students was a part of the project and it concerned all school subjects. Two of the participating schools are large upper secondary schools in the metropolitan area of Southern Finland and almost 80% of the respondents ($N = 739$) were from these schools. One of the schools is situated in the countryside in the Eastern part of Finland ($N = 69$; 7%) and one of the upper secondary schools is exclusively online, and its students are participating throughout the entire country of Finland ($N = 111$; 12%). Sixty percent of the respondents were female ($N = 550$) and 38% were male ($N = 342$). Two percent did not indicate their gender. The respondents were either first year ($N = 393$; 43%) or second year ($N = 498$; 54%) students; the rest ($N = 24$) had been studying for more than three years in an upper secondary school.

To answer the first, second and third research questions, the open-ended questions were analysed qualitatively using a theory-driven, deductive, content analysis (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). When analysing the results, the answers were read three times to find the themes that recurred throughout each question. The analysis revealed that students answered actively at the beginning of the open-ended questions, but the number of blank answers increased towards the end of the questionnaire. The answers that (a) were not linked to the question, (b) did not receive much support from other participants, (c) or were inappropriate, were excluded from the analysis. Thus, classifications were created. The groups that received the most support from the participants have been highlighted in this paper and every group was illustrated with a direct quotation from the dataset. We translated the answers from Finnish to English ourselves.

Quantitative methods such as frequency distributions and measures of central tendency and variation were used to answer the fourth research question about how the upper secondary school students assess their own ability to understand and use teachers' feedback. Differences between the four upper secondary schools and different response groups were analysed using a one-way ANOVA test. If there were statistically significant differences, the differences in the variance analysis were also reported using eta-squared (η^2) and by using crosstabulation and the chi-square test (Cohen, 1988).

The empirical data were based on open-ended and closed-ended questions with built on a four-point Likert-type scale (from 1=*completely disagree* to 4=*completely agree*). Table 1 summarizes how the research questions were operationalized, how the different data sets related to the research questions, and what questions were asked along with examples of the items. As can be seen in Table 1, the first research question was linked to teachers' assessment literacy (TAL), while the second and third questions were linked to students' assessment literacy (SAL). The fourth research question combines both TAL and SAL so that it reflects the students' ability to assess the different methods of formative (FA) and summative (SA) assessment and how they see teachers' FA and SA assessment practices.

Table 1

Summary of constructs and their link to research questions, data source and type, and analysis technique

Construct	Research Question	Data Type and Source	Analysis Technique
Teacher assessment literacy (TAL): FA + SA	RQ1: What assessment practices did upper secondary teachers use?	Qualitative; Two open-ended questions, 2 items: (<i>What good or bad experiences about assessment and feedback did you have?</i> and <i>What experiences did you have about the versatility of assessment?</i>)	Deductive, content analysis

Table 1 Con'd

Table 1 (Con'd)

Summary of constructs and their link to research questions, data source and type, and analysis technique

Student assessment literacy (SAL): perception of teachers' assessment practices. FA + SA	<p>RQ2: What assessment practices did students appreciate?</p> <p>RQ3: What improvement did students propose to their teachers' assessment practices?</p>	<p>Qualitative;</p> <p>Two open ended-questions, 2 items: (<i>What good or bad experiences about assessment and feedback did you have? and What experiences did you have about the versatility of assessment?</i>)</p> <p>Qualitative:</p> <p>Three open-ended questions, 3 items: (<i>In what way should assessment practices in upper secondary schools be improved; Do you feel that you can affect the assessment practices used in the courses? and What have you done or what could you do to improve assessment practices?</i>)</p>	<p>Deductive, content analysis</p> <p>Deductive, content analysis</p>
<p>The suitability of teachers' FA + SA practices from the students' perspective (TAL+SAL). FA + SA</p>	<p>RQ4: How did students perceive their own ability to understand and use teachers' feedback?</p>	<p>Quantitative;</p> <p>Five closed-ended questions and 15 items (Likert- type scale from 1 to 4)</p> <p>Q no. 2, one item: <i>I understand the objectives when the course starts.</i></p> <p>Q no. 3, one item: <i>I know beforehand how the course will be assessed.</i></p> <p>Q no. 6: 11 items linked to how the feedback was given during the course were understood and used. For instance: <i>I understand the verbal feedback that teachers give me or I have good self-assessment skills.</i></p> <p>Q no. 9, one item: <i>By the end of the course, I understand what the grade of the course is based on.</i></p> <p>Q no. 10, one item: <i>I'm able to use all kinds of feedback I was given during the course.</i></p>	<p>One-way ANOVA test, crosstabulation (chi-square-test)</p>

Results

The results reported here are in the order that the research questions are set. In other words, the order will be the same as in Table 1, and the questions are operationalized as shown in Table 1.

Assessment Practices in Schools are not Versatile

To study the first and the second research questions, the students were asked what positive or negative experiences they have encountered regarding the versatility of assessment. This question was answered by 447 students, out of which 409 responses were analysed. The answers that were not analysed were either blank or did not receive much support from other participants. Several issues were identified in the answers. The overall response to this question was poor; a common view amongst the participants was that the experiences regarding versatility are scarce. The results indicate that 243 students (54%) had no experiences of versatile assessment methods. According to the students, teachers merely assess students at the end of the course with examinations and do not give any feedback during the course.

A quarter of the participants ($n = 111$) reported positive experiences of the versatility of their teachers' assessment methods. Some students pointed out that their teachers had given feedback, but most of the students did not elaborate more on the question. Some participants ($n = 23$; 5%) expressed the belief that the practices varied between teachers and subjects.

The comment below shows a somewhat analytical response to the question:

In some courses, one does not get any understanding of one's own learning during the course, and the only form of assessment takes place at the end of the course in the form of a grade. If one continuously received feedback at courses, one could immediately change their learning practices at the beginning of the course in order to reach the requirements set by the teacher. In my opinion, peer assessment is not exploited enough in Finnish courses. In secondary school, we swapped papers with a partner and gave each other feedback on them. It seems that only one Finnish teacher at our school regards peer feedback to be an important component of the lessons. When one hears from a friend that something has gone well, it enhances motivation. Moreover, I feel that assessing a course only with a grade is frustrating. Most often, a grade does not reflect all the work that has been done in the course. I would like teachers to give more oral/written feedback in which there are words, not only grades. (anonymous participant)

As the quotation above shows, this student can use accurate terms and verbalize his or her own learning and assessment regarding learning to learn skills. This student exhibits an accurate understanding of the connection between assessment and its different roles and contexts.

To sum up, the results indicate that more than half of the students did not encounter versatile assessment methods during their upper secondary school studies. Furthermore, based on the responses to the open-ended questions, it seems that teachers do not give feedback during the courses.

Students Have Encountered Somewhat Negative Experiences of Assessment

To study the assessment practices that teachers use, the students were asked about their positive or negative experiences of assessment during the courses offered by upper secondary schools. Altogether, 394 answers were analysed. The majority of those who answered this question ($n = 154$; 39%) felt that they had negative experiences of assessment. The most common answer was that teachers had not given feedback to students. Moreover, several students did not have any experience of feedback nor remembered receiving feedback. Regarding teachers, some students reported that not all teachers treated them equally. Regarding peer feedback, students were not unanimous. Some found it useful ($n = 9$; 2%), whereas some regarded it as problematic ($n = 14$; 4%) as they did not trust their peers' comments.

With respect to positive experiences, 108 students (27%) encountered positive experiences from feedback. Students mentioned that feedback from their teachers helped them learn more. Furthermore, some students pointed out that feedback in the form of a discussion alone with the teacher enhances learning.

The following direct quotation from the dataset represents a student who possesses deep knowledge and understanding of assessment:

I like that during a project, the teacher looks through the work and gives feedback. This gives the student an opportunity to make it better, make corrections and add content. It is nice that teachers invest in the final feedback because students then get to know how the grade is set. Moreover, focusing on students' strengths gives motivation. It is good that criticism is also given because then, one knows what to improve. However, it sometimes feels that encouragement and praise are forgotten at school. Instead, one merely focuses on weaknesses. Regarding future studies, it is useful to know when one has succeeded. It is also nice when teachers ask for feedback on the course. (anonymous participant)

The analysis of this open-ended question yielded similar results to those indicated in Figure 1 shown below. Overall, these results show that there is a lack of feedback in Finnish upper secondary courses

Uncertainty Regarding What Students Can Do to Enhance Assessment Practices

The aim of the third research question was to study improvements students propose regarding assessment. Altogether, 375 students answered this question, out of which 55 were blank. The students were asked to indicate what they had done or what they could do to enhance assessment practices in upper secondary schools. 100 students (27%) answered that they could not do anything, or they were aware of what they could do, whereas 91 students (24%) mentioned that the best option to enhance assessment practices would be to discuss them directly with the teacher. Students can share their own viewpoints about assessment, give practical solutions for enhancing assessment practices, or simply ask the teacher.

A small number of participants ($n = 27$; 7%) suggested that they could influence the assessment practices by enhancing their own learning. In other words, they could give peer

feedback to others, ask for help if they did not understand something, and be active during the courses. 20 students (5%) pointed out different surveys and questionnaires that they can answer.

Next, we have illustrated the results with a direct quotation from the dataset.

I gladly give feedback to my friends on essays if they ask for it. In lessons, I try to encourage my friends in oral tasks. In a way, I give peer feedback spontaneously. I could try to explain my hopes regarding assessment to my teachers, but it often feels that there is no room for it during the lesson and it can sometimes be too nerve-racking to talk with the teacher after the lesson. Some teachers ask for feedback after the final exam, but that is too late for that course. Of course, it is nice to influence how future students will do the course, but I would like to enjoy the changes myself. (anonymous participant)

As the quotation above illustrates, this student can make the connection between goals, achieving goals, and future learning goals. Furthermore, they are also able to distinguish between formative and summative assessment.

Overall, these results provide important insights into developing assessment practices in upper secondary schools. It seems that there is uncertainty among students, as several students are unaware of how to enhance the assessment practices at school.

Students Want More Feedback and Individual Discussions

Regarding how assessment practices in upper secondary schools should be improved, a range of responses was elicited. In total, 445 students answered this question in the questionnaire, out of which 46 were blank. The largest number of participants ($n = 88$; 20%) pointed out that teachers should give more feedback and discuss topics individually with students. Feedback should be given continuously during the courses. Moreover, 68 students (15%) indicated that nothing should be done, or they did not know what should be done.

Other responses to this question included putting less emphasis on examinations ($n = 31$; 7%), making assessment criteria clearer ($n = 25$; 6%), making assessment more versatile ($n = 19$, 4%), and excluding lesson activity from assessment ($n = 20$; 5%). Interestingly, 28 students (6%) pointed out that they saw no need to change the assessment practices at school.

The quotation below provides tangible examples of enhancing assessment methods.

Assessment is too judgmental ("better vs. weaker students"). This tradition starts in primary school and continues during upper secondary school. More oral feedback should be given and constructive individual discussions with the teacher regarding what has gone well and what needs to be improved. Assessing with grades is awkward. It could be replaced with something more constructive and smarter. (anonymous participant)

Taken together, these results are like previous results, suggesting that upper secondary school students want their teachers to give them more feedback. Nevertheless, other suggestions did not receive much support in the dataset.

Students Can Influence the Assessment Practices Used by Their Teachers

Regarding whether students can influence the assessment practices at the beginning of courses, a number of issues were identified in the answers. In total, 738 students answered this question, out of which 690 answers were analysed. Almost half of the students ($n = 318$; 43%) pointed out that they could influence the assessment practices, and several students mentioned examples of these procedures. Firstly, teachers can give examples and let students decide, or students can suggest how teachers could assess and they could decide together. Secondly, students and teachers can discuss the percentages of each exam, presentation, or other assessment method. In other words, the assessed pieces of work do not necessarily affect the course grade similarly. Thirdly, teachers can ask if students want smaller examinations during the course or just one final exam at the end of the course.

Of the 690 analysed answers, approximately one quarter ($n = 191$; 26%) indicated that they cannot affect how teachers assess them, and one student even pointed out that they did not even know that students could affect the assessment practices. Students who answered negatively did not elaborate on their answers in general. However, some students pointed out that some teachers had already decided how they would assess the students and provided no other options or discussed them at all.

181 students (25%) mentioned that they sometimes could affect the assessment practices used in the courses, but it depended on the course and the teacher. If students can affect the practices, teachers typically asked students which areas should be emphasized in assessment.

Next, we have illustrated the results with a direct quotation from the dataset.

It depends on the course. For instance, at math classes, we could self-assess our own exercises a couple of times so that we saw extremely clearly where we had made a mistake. In most subjects, teachers have merely assessed, but one does not concretely see the correct answers. (anonymous participant)

All in all, the results indicate that most students can affect how teachers assess them. However, there are differences between teachers and subjects

Student Assess Their Ability to Understand and Use the Feedback Very Positively

The aim of the fourth research question was to analyse how upper secondary school students assess their own ability to understand and use teachers' feedback. Students ($N = 918$) answered 16 closed-ended claims according whether they strongly disagreed with the claim (score=1) or strongly agreed with the closed-ended sentence (score=4). Figure 1 illustrates the students' answers and average scores for the closed-ended claims regarding students' own abilities to understand and use teachers' or other students' feedback and their understanding about self-assessment practices. In Figure 1, the abbreviations V, PT, J and N come from each school's name.

As can be seen in Figure 1, the students' answers and the scores they gave for certain claims reflect teachers' assessment practices, such as, *During the course I get feedback from teachers*

(2.5). It seems that the average scores in each of the upper secondary schools were the lowest in this claim (between 2.2 and 2.9). The students' answers showed that they know why certain assessment methods were used and how they were intended to support students' learning: *I think that peer assessment is useful* (2.7), *I'm able to give feedback as a part of peer assessment* (2.8), *I think that self-assessment is useful* (2.8) and *I'm able to use the feedback that I was given during the courses* (2.8).

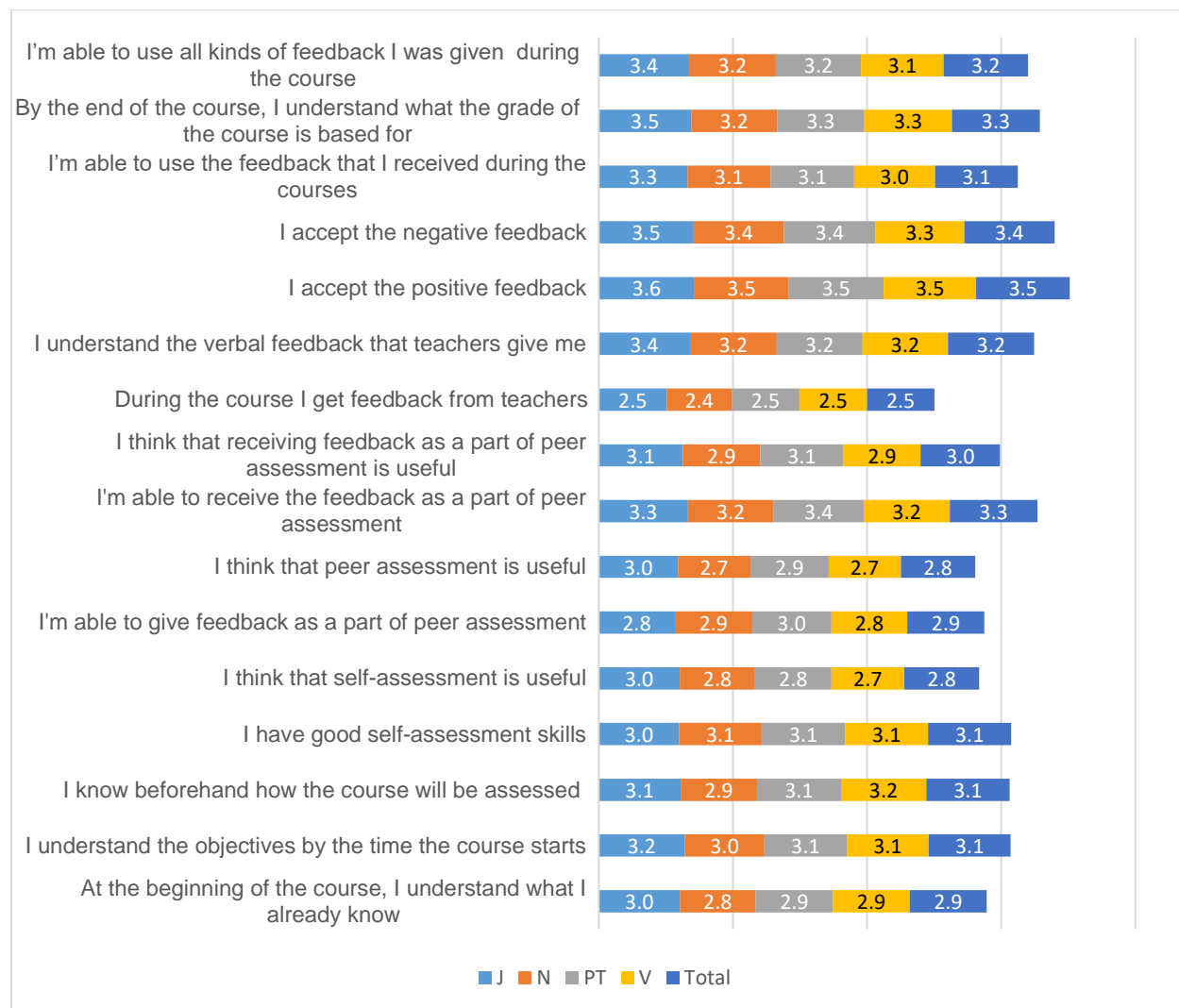


Figure 1. Upper secondary school students' ($N = 918$) answers analysed by their school average scores. *Note:* The capital letters V, PT, J and N refer to the high schools surveyed.

The closed-ended answers were analysed according to the following background variables: school, gender, and how many years students had studied at their upper secondary schools. The results that were statistically very significant (i.e., $p < 0.001$) between the schools, gender, or number of study years are reported in Table 2.

Table 2

Statistically very significant differences in closed-ended claims between schools, gender and number of school years

Significant Variable	Claim	<i>n</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	η^2
School	I think that self-assessment is useful.	908	3	7.156	<0.001	0.23
	I'm able to give feedback as a part of peer assessment.	894	3	6.126	<0.001	0.20
	During the course I get feedback from teachers.	904	3	10.917	<0.001	0.35
	I understand the verbal feedback that teachers give me.	906	3	1.725	<0.001	0.41
	I'm able to use the feedback that I received during the courses.	904	3	12.327	<0.001	0.39
	By the end of the course, I understand what the grade of the course is based on.	900	3	6.221	<0.001	0.20
	I'm able to use all kinds of feedback I was given during the courses.	889	3	6.221	<0.001	0.35
Gender	During the course, I get feedback from teachers.	902	2	16.976	<0.001	0.36
	I accept the negative feedback.	905	2	8.067	<0.001	0.18
Study Years	I'm able to use all kinds of feedback I was given during the courses.	887	3	8.426	<0.001	0.28

Even though there were statistically significant differences between schools, the effect sizes were moderate, as shown in Table 2. School explained 4% of the differences in following claims that reflect teachers' assessment practices: (*During the course, I get feedback from teachers, I understand the verbal feedback that teachers give me and I'm able to use the feedback that I have received during the courses*). In other claims that were linked to students' own understanding of assessment practices, school explained only 2% of the differences. For the claim that measures students' understanding of assessment and assessment practices (*I'm able to use all kinds of feedback I was given during the courses*), school explained 3% of the differences.

In the first claim (*During the course, I get feedback from teachers*), gender explained 4% of the differences. Girls (36%) disagreed more with this claim than boys (24%). Moreover, in the second claim (*I accept the negative feedback*), gender explained 2% of the differences. In other words, girls (6% disagreed or disagreed strongly with the claim) assessed their ability to receive negative feedback worse than the boys (3% disagreed or disagreed strongly with this claim).

Regarding the number of years students had studied in an upper secondary school, there were statistically very significant differences ($p < 0.001$) in only one claim: *I'm able to use all kinds of feedback I was given during the courses*, as is seen in Table 2. The number of years of study explained 3% of the differences in students' answers in this claim. The longer students were at school, the better they assessed their ability to use the feedback.

According to the quantitative results, it seems that the students mainly knew beforehand the objectives that are to be assessed during a course, they understood how to use the feedback given by their teachers and they considered their self- and peer-assessment skills as being rather good. Instead, many of the students ($n = 465$; 51%) answered that they did not get feedback from teachers during the course. However, most of the students ($n = 802$; 87%) answered that they understood what the grade of the course was based on. In addition, it seems that peer assessment as a method of giving and receiving feedback was at least known or understood by certain students.

To sum up the results, regarding the first question, teachers tend to apply somewhat traditional assessment practices, such as examinations (see Arrafii & Sumarni, 2017; Gottheiner & Siegel, 2012; Popham, 2010). However, differences between subjects and schools exist, as some teachers utilize versatile assessment methods in their teaching. Regarding the second question, students appreciate feedback from teachers and individual discussions with them. Moreover, less emphasis should be put on examinations (see Green & Mantz, 2002; Finnish National Agency for Education, 2015). As far as improving the assessment practices is concerned, students want more feedback (see Finnish National Agency for Education, 2015). Nevertheless, many students share the view that they cannot affect how they are assessed. Regarding the fourth question, many students were able to use the feedback from their teachers. However, nearly half the students pointed out that they do not get feedback. This result is confusing, and it raises the question whether the students should be able to use all the potential in their learning and achievement. If they are not given feedback, they are lacking guidance and the opportunity to understand the learning objectives, the progress they have made and the next steps (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

Discussion

The aim of this paper was to study assessment practices in Finnish upper secondary schools as well as to understand the ability of students and teachers to give, receive and use feedback. Based on both qualitative and quantitative data, it seems that the assessment practices used by Finnish upper secondary school teachers are traditional; teachers tend to use examinations at the end of the courses in spite of the national curriculum, which states that teachers should assess in versatile ways and give opportunities for the use of self and peer assessments (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2015). Furthermore, most students point out that feedback during courses is lacking, and that differences between teachers and subjects exist.

These results are similar to previous ones that have revealed that assessment practices in Finnish schools are categorized as traditional and that the feedback practices are one-sided, with emphasis on summative assessment (see Hildén & Härmälä, 2015; Kuukka & Metsämuuronen, 2016; Räisänen, 2013). Assessment continues to be teacher-led, in spite of the fact that with the cognitive and social constructivist approach to learning, students' active role is considered to be important in assessment.

The results raise some interesting questions: do students understand what feedback is, and are teachers' feedback practices linked to the learning process as Hattie and Timperley (2007) have suggested in their study? As students are primarily interested in grades (Black, Harrison, Lee,

Marshall, & Wiliam, 2003), it can be speculated that they associate assessment with grades, which is summative assessment, and overlooks feedback, which is formative assessment. In other words, as grades are seldom given in formative assessment, it can be hypothesized that students do not regard feedback as assessment. Moreover, some students mentioned in the questionnaire that they had never received feedback from their upper secondary school. While this may be true, whether teachers have explained what assessment means and what feedback refers to can also be the subject of speculation. Therefore, as a part of teacher assessment literacy skills, we argue that teachers should pay more attention to their assessment and feedback practices so that students could be aware of their teachers' feedback and use it for their learning, as well as for developing their learning to learn skills. These learning to learn skills could be seen as being part of a student's assessment skills; giving and receiving feedback have become effective instructional practices. To take advantage of the power of classroom assessment, teachers should be taught to use assessment as a teaching and learning tool—not only as a grading tool (Stiggins, 2014).

The qualitative results presented in this article indicate that some students are able to distinguish between the multiple tasks of assessment, they are able to use the feedback that they have received to support and enhance learning, and that they require their teachers to give them feedback. Moreover, it is apparent from the students' answers that, as suggested by Hattie and Timperley (2007), they are able to use feedback to set goals (i.e., Where am I going? What are the goals?), to assess their own learning and progress (i.e., How am I going? What progress is being made toward the goal?), and to assess how to improve (i.e., Where to next? What activities need to be undertaken to make better progress?).

As one of the tasks of assessment is to enhance learning, the results of our study pave the way for pondering if we should consider students' assessment literacy skills (SAL) along with teachers' assessment literacy skills. These skills are especially connected to important questions, such as how students understand their teachers' feedback, and how students work with their teachers' feedback. Additionally, understanding assessment is an instrumental part of learning to learn; Crisp (2012) has even launched the term *integrative assessment* to highlight that one of the important tasks of assessment is to develop students' learning to learn skills for their future.

As mentioned in the literature, lifelong learning is one of the aims of Finnish upper secondary education. Researchers have also underlined sustainable assessment, in which the role of assessment is to make students take an active role in their learning and assessment processes (Boud & Soler, 2016). To become lifelong learners requires students to become aware of their own learning. Put differently, students need to analyse their strengths and weaknesses, and understand the learning process itself, for which assessment literacy skills are needed. On the one hand, our results suggest that certain students already possess developed analytical skills for analysing their learning. However, not all students seem to be able to verbalize their learning. This finding, while preliminary, might indicate that teachers should pay more attention to assessment to make it more tangible. On the other hand, the results may raise concerns about students' perceptions and knowledge about the usefulness of feedback; students most likely regard as useful those feedback practices that they have had experience with, and suggest improvements for practices that they are not able to use to reach their goals.

This research has produced additional questions in need of further investigation; a longitudinal study could be used to assess how students' understanding of assessment develops over the course of the upper secondary education, and how teachers' feedback has helped students learn. Moreover, thematic interviews could be used to examine feedback practices in upper secondary school education more thoroughly to enhance both teacher training and in-service training. Research in specific subjects is particularly needed. Finally, more research is needed to study students' assessment literacy.

Our study could be subject to criticism. The results of this study are not statistically or geographically representative, because the data consisted only of 1% of the students (918 students out of a total 103,400 students in 2018) and 1% of the schools (four upper secondary schools of 404 schools in 2018). Despite these shortcomings, the findings reveal several salient features that are linked to teachers' and students' understanding of assessment, and the use of the ways they develop various skills as a part of teaching and learning processes.

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